

This briefing paper provides an introduction to the work of ARK, with a particular focus on its three surveys. The key issues of funding, questionnaire development and the measurement of identity are then discussed.

About ARK

ARK is a joint resource based in Queen's University Belfast (QUB) and the University of Ulster (UU). Founded in 2010, ARK makes social and political information on Northern Ireland available to the widest possible audience. Users include researchers, teachers, schoolchildren, policymakers, journalists, community/voluntary sector workers and anyone with an interest in Northern Ireland society and politics. ARK is first and foremost a website - www.ark.ac.uk – although a range of dissemination and outreach activities also support our work.

The Director of ARK – Professor Gillian Robinson – is based at INCORE, University of Ulster. The Deputy Director – Dr Paula Devine – is based in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast.

ARK surveys

ARK runs a suite of annual attitudinal surveys that aim to provide time-series attitudinal data across age groups to inform policy development:

- **Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey**

The Northern Ireland Life and Times Survey (NILT) is an annual survey monitoring the attitudes of people aged 18 years and over in Northern Ireland to a wide range of social and political issues. NILT began in 1998, and follows on from the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes (NISA) Survey, which ran from 1989-1996. NILT has a modular format, and so each year's survey includes four modules reflecting key social policy issues. Many of these are repeated over time, in order to provide a time series of public opinion.

- **Young Life and Times Survey**

The Young Life and Times (YLT) Survey is the sister survey to NILT but is specially designed to monitor attitudes among young people in Northern Ireland to social and political issues. Founded in its present format in 2003, YLT records the attitudes of 16 year olds.

- **Kids' Life and Times Survey**

Since 2008, the Kids' Life and Times (KLT) Survey has been monitoring the attitudes of children in P7 (10-11 year olds) to issues that affect them.

Paula Devine is co-ordinator of NILT, and also works on YLT. Dr Dirk Schubotz is Director of YLT, and is also based in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work, Queen's University Belfast. Dr Devine and Dr Schubotz co-ordinate the management of KLT, and Professor Robinson is involved in the development of all three surveys. Other ARK team members (notably Lizanne Dowds) are involved in the management and development of these surveys.

In keeping with ARK's ethos of making social research freely accessible, a wide range of material is available online for each of the surveys:

- Questionnaires
- Tables of results for every question, broken down by age, sex and religious grouping
- Datasets in SPSS format
- Technical notes
- Publications
- Query and Helpline contact details

Funding

The survey teams are based across the campuses of QUB and UU. ARK received core funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) from 2006-2012, which covered staff costs, but not the costs of running the surveys. All costs (both staff time and associated survey costs) are obtained from a variety of sources, including government departments, academic research funders, NGOs and other organisations.

Funding applications are instigated in a variety of ways:

- ARK team members apply directly to funders for grants to cover fieldwork and staff costs relating to a module. For example, Dr Schubotz currently holds a grant from OFMDFM to cover 50% of the costs of running YLT for the next 3 years. Professor Robinson and Dr Devine hold a grant to run NILT modules relating to community relations and attitudes to minority ethnic groups in 2012 and 2013.
- A funder will approach ARK to discuss funding a module. For example, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) approached Dr Schubotz to run questions on shared education and children's rights in 2012 KLT and YLT..
- A researcher or academic within QUB or UU will approach ARK about submitting a joint funding proposal.

Questionnaire development

The process of developing the questionnaire for each survey is a collaborative activity, involving the relevant ARK survey team, associated subject experts, and funders. The ARK team has significant expertise on the methodology of running surveys. However, in order to make the questionnaires as relevant and useful as possible, they will often consult a series of subject experts. This has included other academics, researchers and government policy makers, as well as researchers and practitioners within the voluntary/community sectors. However, the survey team are responsible for the final version for the questionnaire, thus ensuring a valid and robust mechanism for recording public opinion.

In order to provide comparisons with other regions, NILT often participates in the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), whereby the same module of questions is asked in over 40 countries worldwide. NILT has also replicated modules from the British Social Attitudes Survey, as well as replicated NILT modules within the Republic of Ireland in order to provide an all-Ireland context.

As part of its participatory ethos, at the end of the YLT and KLT questionnaires each year, respondents are asked to suggest topics and/or questions for inclusion in the following year. This has provided a wide range of suggestions, many of which have been included in future questionnaires.

The time-series element of ARK's surveys is also significant, and where possible, questions are repeated over time. Community relations is a key element of both NILT and YLT. In fact, many of the questions within the NILT community relations module were asked as part of the Northern Ireland Social Attitudes Survey, which ran from 1989-1996. This allows for a very useful time-series, which is available online at

http://www.ark.ac.uk/sol/surveys/community_relations/time_series/ The NILT team work closely with OFMDFM Equality Branch in order to provide key indicators for their community relations monitoring work.

Nevertheless, the social and political context is important when designing questions, and so it is sometimes imperative that we change the content of modules and the wording of questions. Survey questions may change over time because topics become less relevant, new issues emerge and/or government policies change.

For example, NILT has included questions relating to ‘neutral’ spaces since 2004, such as:

These days, many employers try to make their workplaces ‘neutral spaces’ – that is where there are no symbols on display of either Protestant or Catholic culture and traditions. Thinking of your own workplace, would you say that it was a ‘neutral space’?

However, since 2006, the module has also included a similar question relating to ‘shared’ space:

Thinking about relations between Protestants and Catholics, as well as between people of different nationalities and ethnic background, the government is trying to encourage Northern Ireland to become a ‘shared space’, where people from all walks of life feel safe and welcomed.

Thinking about your workplace – if you have one – is it a place where you feel you can be open about your own cultural identity?

Identity

The ARK surveys ask about identity in many ways, reflecting the concept of multiple identities. Thus, NILT asks respondents about their national identity ‘British/Irish/Ulster/Northern Irish/Other/Don’t know’, and there have been changes over time in how respondents have identified themselves, not least, the growth of the ‘Northern Irish’ identity’. NILT respondents are also asked if they would describe themselves as ‘Unionist/Nationalist/Neither’.

In relation to constitutional preferences, the response options have changed over time, again reflecting the contemporary context. Thus, from 1989 to 2006, the question:

Do you think the long-term policy for Northern Ireland should be for it...

had the following response options:

- Remain part of the United Kingdom
- Reunify with the rest of Ireland?
- Independent state
- Other answer (please specify)
- Don’t know

As a result of a changed political landscape, and in order to reflect the bedding down of the devolved institutions in 2007, the response options were amended to:

- Remain part of the United Kingdom *with direct rule*
- Remain part of the United Kingdom *with devolved government*
- Reunify with the rest of Ireland?
- Independent state
- Other answer (please specify)
- Don’t know

Within NILT and YLT, all respondents are asked if they regard themselves as belonging to any particular religion, and if so, to which one. However, there has been a rise in the proportion of respondents saying that they have no religion (to 13% in 2010 among NILT respondents). At the same time, many people would see themselves as part of a Catholic community or Protestant community, without necessarily identifying with, or practising, a particular religious denomination.

In order to reflect this, when YLT began in 2003, respondents were asked:

And do you see yourself as ...

with the following responses:

- Part of the Catholic community
- Part of the Protestant community
- Neither

There has also been a significant change in the question regarding ethnic identity in YLT. In 2003 and 2004, YLT used a question format which was derived from the UK Census:

To which of these groups do you consider you belong?

This was followed by a closed list of the perceived main ethnic groups in the UK.

After consultation with a variety of academics and other interested parties, and acknowledging the notion of fluent and multiple identities, from 2005 onwards, this census question was replaced with an open question:

Do which ethnic group you consider you belong?

On the one hand, this has resulted in a vast increase in missing data on this variable. On the other hand, we now feel that we have a more accurate understanding of how ethnic identity is constructed among 16-year olds. The responses show an overlap of ethnic, religious, national other identities.

Websites

Further information, including tables of results, can be found on the following websites:

ARK: www.ark.ac.uk

NILT: www.ark.ac.uk/nilt

YLT: www.ark.ac.uk/ylt

KLT: www.ark.ac.uk/klt

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